



The critique of methodological nationalism: Theory and history

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Daniel Chernilo

Abstract

This article seeks to further our understanding of what methodological nationalism is and to offer some insights towards its overcoming. The critical side of its argument explicates the paradoxical constitution of the current debate on methodological nationalism – namely, the fact that methodological nationalism is simultaneously regarded as wholly negative and all-pervasive in contemporary social science. I substantiate the idea of this paradox by revisiting some of the most successful attempts at the conceptualization of the nation-state that have sought to transcend methodological nationalism in four disciplines: sociology, nationalism studies, anthropology and social psychology. The positive side of my argument offers a distinction between different versions of methodological nationalism with the help of which it tries to address some of the problems found in the literature. *Theoretically*, methodological nationalism is associated with, and criticized for, its *explanatory* reductionism in which the rise and main features of the nation-state are used to explicate the rise and main features of modernity itself. *Historically*, the article reassesses the problem of its *prevalence*, that is, whether methodological nationalism is a key feature of the history of the social sciences.

Keywords

cosmopolitanism, methodological nationalism, modernity, nation-state, social sciences

The question of methodological nationalism has gained currency in contemporary social sciences over the past couple of decades. Although it was first identified as a problem in the early 1970s (Martins 1974), it was only with the rise – and later decline – of globalization theory that it became a salient issue in relation to studying the nation-state's

Corresponding author:

Daniel Chernilo, Department of Social Sciences, Loughborough University, Loughborough LE11 3TU, UK
Email: D.Chernilo@lboro.ac.uk

position in modernity (Beck 2000; Chernilo 2007a; Wimmer and Schiller 2002). The critical aim of this piece is to argue that even though we have moved a long way in clarifying what we mean by, and what is wrong with, methodological nationalism, the debate seems to have stalled. Its positive goal is the introduction of a distinction between a theoretical and a historical version of the argument on methodological nationalism that may enhance its necessary critique. The substantive task that remains is trying to conceptualize the nation-state beyond methodological nationalism.

In terms of its structure, the article begins by explicating the *paradoxical constitution* of the current debate on methodological nationalism – namely, the fact that methodological nationalism is simultaneously regarded as wholly untenable and all-pervasive in a number of recent discussions across the social sciences. It illustrates this paradox by looking at some of the problems faced by some sophisticated attempts at conceptualizing the nation-state in sociology, nationalism studies, anthropology and social psychology.¹ Both strengths and weaknesses of these approaches will be highlighted in order to identify some of the most pressing issues when seeking to conceptualize the nation-state *beyond* methodological nationalism. The following sections seek to break that paradox by expanding, in turn, on the theoretical and the historical dimensions of the debate. On the theoretical side, methodological nationalism is associated with, and criticized for, its *explanatory* reductionism; it arises when the rise and main features of the nation-state are used to explicate the rise and main features of modernity itself. It is held that the critique of methodological nationalism requires, at this level, a strongly universalistic conception of modernity in which the nation-state is explicated as a result of modernity's deep-seated structural trends. On the historical side, the argument moves against the conventional view that the social sciences have tended to reify and naturalize the nation-state. The breaking of the paradox of methodological nationalism lies, at this level, in reassessing the problem of its *prevalence*, that is, whether methodological nationalism is a key, if not *the* key, feature of the history of the social sciences at large.

The paradoxical debate on methodological nationalism in contemporary social sciences

Methodological nationalism is seen as a result of the historical formation of both *modernity* and the *social sciences* that cohered around processes of nation-state formation (Calhoun 1999; Smelser 1997; Wagner 1994). At its simplest, then, methodological nationalism is found when *the nation-state is treated as the natural and necessary representation of modern society*. A fuller definition would run as follows: *the equation between the idea of society as social theory's key conceptual reference and the historical processes of modern nation-state formation*. The idea of society becomes the all-encompassing presupposition upon which the most important features of modernity are explicated: class formations, growing bureaucratization, structural differentiation. The nation-state and modern society become conceptually as well as historically indistinguishable.

A fundamental issue to note is that methodological nationalism is real and poses real problems – indeed, it can be found within the social sciences as much as within the social world itself. In fact, a salient feature of the literature that has explicitly dealt with

understanding the rise and main features of the nation-state in modernity is that no one positions herself as in favour of methodological nationalism. The polemic is just not split between those for whom methodological nationalism opens up new avenues for our knowledge about the nation-state and others who argue that it hinders our ability to understand it. Even if one takes into account the fact that there is a dispute over its causes, consequences and possible remedies, the fact remains that methodological nationalism is consensually rejected – and rightly so. This may not be wholly surprising because methodological nationalism is regarded as a form of reification, but it is nonetheless curious to realize that no one seems prepared to challenge the proposition that methodological nationalism *is* in fact a reductionist way of thinking.

But the paradoxical constitution of the current debate comprises an additional dimension: the label ‘methodological nationalism’ is being thrown back and forth among the discussants as a mark of shame. We are in the presence of a certain intellectual outlook that is unanimously rejected but which, allegedly at least, extends all across contemporary social sciences. Methodological nationalism is generally recognized as a sin, but we all become unintended sinners the very second we try to grasp the nation-state’s fundamental features and the problematic nature of its position in modernity.² The paradox of the current debate on methodological nationalism is that *no one admits being committed to it, and yet its presence is allegedly found in every corner of the contemporary social scientific landscape.*

The works I should now like to review are chosen because, from their different disciplines, they have all made an important contribution to our understanding of what a nation-state is and where its relationship to modernity lies. I have only admiration for them and their explicit interest in avoiding the kinds of reification and naturalization that are the centre of the critique of methodological nationalism. But it is my contention that they still confront serious difficulties, and that these are equally instructive. If the following presentation of different disciplinary standpoints seems at times unnecessarily descriptive, I find this necessary in order to prove (a) that the debate is beginning to move in circles and (b) that methodological nationalism poses real problems to everyone interested in studying the nation-state. My own contribution to the discussion lies, towards the end of this section, in advancing a distinction between a theoretical and a historical version of the argument of methodological nationalism that may help start breaking up the paradoxical state of the debate.

Let me begin with one of the earliest attempts at conceptualizing the nation-state without naturalizing its emergence and key features. Anthony Giddens was possibly one of the first social scientists to address directly the substantive issues behind the problem of methodological nationalism: what is a nation-state and what is its role in conceptualizing modernity’s development? In 1973, that is, before the notion of methodological nationalism was coined, he argued that ‘[t]he primary unit of sociological analysis, the sociologist’s “society” – in relation to the industrialised world at least – has always been, and must continue to be, the administratively bounded nation-state’ (Giddens 1973: 265). Later, in 1981, he argued that the modern nation-state and modern capitalism were co-original and had co-evolved: ‘capitalist states emerged as nation-states: the association between capitalism and the nation-state was not the “accident of history” that it has appeared to be’. He then added that, despite its European origins, ‘the

nation-state system has become a world-wide one . . . the emergence of the nation-state was integrally bound up with the expansion of capitalism' (Giddens 1981: 12). The key for Giddens is the nation-state's capacity for drawing together all the resources that effectively turned it into a kind of "power-container" shaping the development of the capitalist societies'. The definitive claim of his studies into the position of the nation-state in modernity is, however, dangerously close to methodological nationalism: 'modern "societies" are nation-states, existing within a nation-state system . . . "societies" have often been understood by sociologists, implicitly or otherwise, as a clearly bounded system with an obvious and easily identifiable set of distinguishing traits' (Giddens 1985: 1, 17). Giddens makes his characterization of modernity cohere around the nation-state: the success of the nation-state as a modern socio-political arrangement has to do with *having become* the organizing centre of modernity itself. But as he arrives at these results he manages to avoid falling into the problem of methodological nationalism because the success of the nation-state as a modern socio-political arrangement *depends upon* what he refers to as the four key structural dimensions of modernity: bureaucratization, industrialization, capitalism and militarization/surveillance (Giddens 1985). In fact, already in his early work he had qualified his commitment to the nation-state's apparent centrality in modernity by arguing that the idea of society, understood as the national society, 'has *never* been the isolated, the "internally developing" system which has normally been implied in social theory' (Giddens 1973: 265). The point I am trying to make is that, regardless of whether the *historical* claim that the nation-state has become central in modernity is true, it remains independent from the *explanatory* proposition that modernity itself can be delineated as the sum of different national trajectories that evolve from the inside out. The causal relation he advances is that the worldwide expansion of the nation-state system is the *result* rather than the *cause* of the development of modernity itself.

If we now turn our attention to nationalism studies, an obvious choice is Anthony D. Smith, whose interest in nations and nationalism derives from his own previous reconstruction of conceptions of development and evolution in mainstream sociology (Smith 1973). He diagnosed serious difficulties in such conceptions – also, as in Giddens, in terms of an endogenous and internalist bias – and thence comes to the conclusion that sociology's naïve modernism has simply neglected the importance of nationalism and national identities as key aspects of social life. The conviction he has held ever since is that the rise of modern nation-states has to be traced back to the people's own pre-modern ethnic origins (Smith 1991). And in terms of the disciplinary development of sociology, his key point is that classical sociology was simply unable to grasp the problems of nationhood, nation-building and nation-state formation (Smith 1979, 1983). More recently, he argues that 'the fashionable Western insistence on multiculturalism and the polyethnic nation' have not at all undermined the salience of the nation-state in the international scene, as they have just not 'dissolved the centrality of dominant or core *ethnies*, whose culture, myths, mores and memories continue to define the national state' (Smith 2006: 179).

When this approach is subjected to scrutiny, the standard criticism is that nations as such cannot be identified before the rise of mass political movements in the late 19th century. But the goal of the critique is not only to reject the proposition that nations – in

their prior *ethnie* form – are pre-modern. It aims, much more profoundly, at the core of the ontological claim in Smith's ethno-symbolic approach: nations are not the definitive *Träger* of human identities to be traced back endlessly in history. Thus, for instance, while Walker Connor rejects the kind of reductionism that is attached to transhistorical conceptions of human identity, he seems to reintroduce it from the modernist backdoor. Nations are no longer equated with the *long durée* but have become the unrivalled form of social identity in modernity: the history of nations has become, in practice, coeval with that of modernity. As soon as the two modern conceptions of nation – political citizenry and ethnic identity – become one, we realize that 'the political history of the world since the Napoleonic Wars has largely been a tale of tension between the two identities, each possessing its own irrefragable and exclusive claim to political legitimacy' (Connor 2004: 38). Modernism and ethno-symbolism surely push in opposite directions when it comes to timing the emergence of the nation, but on the critical proposition of pre-empting the salience of nations and nation-states *in modernity*, they do not stand that far apart.

In the fields of anthropology and migration studies, Andreas Wimmer and Nina G. Schiller (2002) have urged that methodological nationalism be definitively overcome. They have explicitly reflected upon different versions of methodological nationalism in the social sciences and distinguish between three different strands that they call:

ignorance, naturalization and territorial limitation. The three modes intersect and mutually reinforce each other, forming a coherent epistemic structure, a self-reinforcing way of looking at and describing the social world. The three variants are more or less prominent in different fields of enquiry. Ignorance is the dominant modus of methodological nationalism in grand theory; naturalization of 'normal' empirical science; territorial limitation of the study of nationalism and state building. (Wimmer and Schiller 2002: 308)

This distinction between different versions of methodological nationalism comes up as a result of their own empirical work, so it is not surprising that they find that so-called grand theory has simply ignored the nation-state. Their case against the methodological nationalism to be found in 'normal' empirical social science is, however, stronger. Schiller's attention has been devoted to the relationship between migration and the nation-state, and she duly complains about the mutually reinforcing trend of depicting recent migration trends as novel and hence neglecting the role of migratory waves throughout the history of nation-states (Basch et al. 1994). A false dichotomy is thus set up between the traditional and fully territorialized nation-state and the recent flurry of studies on flows, fluidities and mobilities (Levitt and Schiller 2004). Wimmer's work on the politics of ethnic cleansing highlights the exclusionary side of national democracy. He firmly associates the nation-state with modernity's key features: 'modernity itself is cast in nationalist and ethnicized forms' (Wimmer 2002: 52). But the crucial element that pushes his analysis beyond methodological nationalism is his insistence on how the nation-state incarnates the project of modernity with its *lights* (national democracy) as well as its *shadows* (ethnic cleansing).

One last case can be found in social psychology. Michael Billig has studied there how the ideology of modern nationalism is uncritically reproduced at the level of common

sense. What he finely refers to as the ‘banal nationalism’ of most Western democracies is a form of nationalism whose ‘metonymic image . . . is not a flag which is constantly waved with fervent passion; it is the flag hanging unnoticed on the public building’ (Billig 1995: 8). He points to the complications associated with studying the nation-state as he suggests that nationalism is not only ‘simultaneously obvious and obscure’ but also ‘the ideology by which the world of nations has come to seem the natural world’ (Billig 1995: 36). Quite rightly, he urges that we rather look at the nation-state as a single form of modern socio-political arrangement: ‘[w]ith historical hindsight, it might seem inevitable that the nation-state system emerged, but it is hard to see an inevitability about the particular nations themselves’ (Billig 1995: 28). And he is surely aware of the complications at stake as he argues that ‘[h]istorical forces may have combined to produce the nation-state as modernity’s logical form of governance. Yet, a willful anarchy seems to have accompanied the way the logical principle has been established in practice’ (Billig 1995: 24). He denounces a certain fallacy he witnesses in much of 20th-century social science between ‘our patriotism’ and ‘their nationalism’ (Billig 1995: 55), a separation which results from the ideological prejudices upon which these disciplines have been established, and which goes a long way to reinforce the naturalization of the nation-state that has proved so prevalent in these same disciplines. But his own theorizing begins to feel the heat of methodological nationalism as he echoes the claim that nowhere is methodological nationalism more apparent than in sociology’s use of the idea of society: ‘the “society” which lies at the heart of sociology’s own self-definition is created in the image of the nation-state . . . the emphasis on “society” and the implicit modeling of “society” on nation, has both reified and concealed nationhood’ (Billig 1995: 53–4). As he grounds his analyses precisely upon the dichotomy he seeks to overcome, the danger is, however, to end up mirroring the object of one’s own critique. What we have now is ‘his own’ self-critical attitude towards methodological nationalism and ‘their’ – mainstream social sciences, that is – naturalization of the nation-state.

As indicated, in the past few pages I have simply tried to substantiate the claim of the paradoxical constitution of the current debate on methodological nationalism: it poses real problems, no one is committed to it, but it is present everywhere. The nation-state has proved elusive for the social sciences so the difficulties that emerge when studying it are to be taken seriously. Indeed, it would be unfair simply to raise the charge of methodological nationalism against these works in terms of both their explicit intentions and substantive contributions. Yet we have seen how in all cases unresolved tensions remain, and at least some of the complications have to do with the need of specifying further the different planes and issues at stake. Peter Beilharz (2008) has in fact questioned whether the debate centres at all on ‘methodological’ issues or whether it is about ‘theoretical’ or even ‘ontological’ nationalism. Start calling things the way they actually are is always good advice, but my option for now is to stick with a term that has served us reasonably well – at least because it has brought to the foreground a number of issues that had remained in the background for too long: the common-sense use of the idea of society, and the salience of nations and states in modernity.

Having said this, we need to acknowledge that more than methodological questions are at stake. Indeed, the specifically *methodological* dimension is at the centre of Ulrich Beck’s comments that as long as statistics keep being uncritically collected at the

national level, and keep being organized for cross-national comparisons, we shall remain unable to do research outside the national box (Beck and Sznaider 2006): a number of aspects of modern social life – old trends as well as emerging ones – cannot be registered, or get underrepresented, on the basis of national statistics. From centuries-old experiences of transnational families whose memories and current lives have been split among several nationalities and states to the rapid transformation of sporting allegiances in which neighbourhood, town, region and several countries become intermingled in the fate of one team; from the persistent cosmopolitan networks of protection that intellectuals and revolutionaries have provided for themselves in times of crisis to the changing funding-strategies of scientific institutions which owe more to local and global partners than to ‘their’ national governments. In more analytical terms, we need to gather empirical information in such a way that makes it possible to reflect upon trends and processes that have been traditionally neglected because national categories pre-empt data collection.

But we have also seen that these are not the central dimensions on which the debate actually focuses. What we are really after is to understand the rise, main features and normative legacy of the nation-state in modernity. I would therefore like to advance a distinction between a *theoretical* and a *historical* way of addressing the problem of methodological nationalism that may hopefully help us to move forward.

The *theoretical* version of methodological nationalism arises when it is assumed that the deep-seated conceptual structure of the social sciences leads them to think exclusively from within the national box: modernity’s deep-seated structural trends and features are seen as the sum of a number of different national trajectories. The social sciences would have adopted the nation-state as its ultimate and most consequential blind-spot and the conceptualization of modernity – explicitly or otherwise – becomes wholly reliant on the nation-state to have any real explanatory purchase. If we now try to summarize the different positions that seem to fall into this version of methodological nationalism, the following five arguments can be found:

1. Explanatory argument: The rise and main features of the nation-state are used to explicate the rise and main features of modernity itself. Modernity is the sum of national trajectories.
2. Centrality argument: Nationalism is the modern culture and modernity is cast in nationalistic terms.
3. Container argument: The nation-state has succeeded in caging all aspects of modern social life.
4. Internalist argument: The nation-state is an isolated, self-sufficient and endogenously developing unit.
5. International system argument: The world is naturally divided into an indefinite number of formally analogous national units and the international system is composed now by nearly 200 of those units.

The *historical* version of methodological nationalism suggests that, because the foundational period of social theory and the social sciences is coeval with that of the rise of the nation-state, these disciplines have tended to model, explicitly or otherwise, all

their major concepts such as society, culture or the state on ideal notions of the nation-state. The prevalence of methodological nationalism in the social sciences is then predicated upon the idea that modernity's most salient historical trends are processes of nation-state unification alongside territorial and cultural lines. Again in this case, we find that the historical form of methodological nationalism consists in a number of different arguments.

6. Prevalence argument: The nation-state is the most fundamental blind-spot of the social sciences' canon.
7. Ignorance argument: Grand social theory has thoroughly neglected the importance of the nation-state in the development of modernity.
8. Reification argument: Any attempt at studying the nation-state with conventional social scientific tools is bound to naturalize its most important features.
9. Eurocentrism argument: As the nation-state is mostly a European institution, methodological nationalism becomes another expression of the social sciences' inextricable Eurocentrism.
10. Rise and fall argument: The co-evolution of the social sciences and the nation-state ties their destinies closely together; the social sciences' current crisis is explicated by the nation-state's own historical decline.

Arguments 1 to 5 emphasize the theoretical problem of *explicating* modernity, whereas arguments 6 to 10 point to the *historical juncture* that links the rise of the social sciences, the rise of modernity and the rise of the nation-state itself. Both groups of arguments can complement each other, but they neither automatically require nor necessarily presuppose one another. I believe that this distinction may help us account for some of the difficulties we have witnessed, and in what follows I shall expand on each version in the spirit of contributing to move the debate forward.

Theory: Can the nation-state explicate the rise of modernity?

Arguments 2 to 5 above have the nation-state as modernity's key organizing centre and as the locus around which the modern project almost naturally coheres – what Stephen Toulmin (1990) refers to as the scaffolding of modernity. In relation to the literature we reviewed in the previous section, then, Wimmer and Schiller may be falling for argument 2, whereas Giddens and Billig seem closer to arguments 3 and 5. But they all reject argument 1, explanatory methodological nationalism, as their claims all move *from* modernity's central features *to* processes of nation-state formation. Even if the nation-state is seen as the central container of modern social relations in these works, its emergence and main features are accounted for from the outside in, as it were. And although there is a naturalization of the nation-state there, the most problematic form of reification of argument 1 is being avoided. This bolder kind of *explanatory* methodological nationalism arises when *the rise and main features of the nation-state are used to explicate the rise and main features of modernity itself* – the thesis that the nation-state can, on its own, be used to account for modernity's structural features.

I find this last proposition particularly problematic because, rather than looking at the nation-state as the formidable institutional *outcome* of modernity's deep-seated trends that it actually is, the nation-state is taken instead as modernity's fundamental *cause*. The nation-state becomes the key independent variable with the help of which whatever aspect of modernity can be eventually delineated, and the ultimate explication of modernity relies fully upon the nation-state. It is when nations become ontologically given, either throughout human history (Smith) or at least in modernity (Connor), that we encounter argument 1 of explanatory methodological nationalism.³

Indeed, the question of methodological nationalism arose to counteract some internalist tendencies that were arguably prevalent in 1970s sociology, so the question has always cohered around the role of the nation-state in explicating modernity's key developmental tendencies (Chernilo 2007a, 2010). The critical point here is whether the nation-state is given a key role in the explication of modernity itself: from *Sonderwegs* that account for the peculiarities of national customs and tastes to the way in which the national curricula and health provision are organized; from millennial phenotypes to differentiated attitudes towards pets and children's access to restaurants. Nationalistic ways of thinking, and methodological nationalism is surely one of them, take for granted the world's division into nations and then explicate the dramatic expansion of the nation-state throughout the world as a kind of natural telos of whatever number of *Volksgeists*. They fall into the logical fallacy of presupposing the existence of that phenomenon they in fact ought to be explicating: the success of the nation-state form over the past two centuries.

To transcend this form of methodological nationalism requires robust conceptualizations of modernity as a single evolutionary accomplishment of the human species so that we can *then* begin to delineate its internal differentiation according to a number of different lines – regional, religious, socio-economic and indeed national. Rather than incommensurability among essentially different worldviews, the challenge is to reassess modernity's original universalistic aspirations by coming to terms with its definitive global expansion vis-à-vis the decline of its Eurocentric matrix: the task is that of comprehending those general trends and events that mark the *truly worldwide condition of current modernity* without, in the same move, continuing to advance unsound generalizations *from the West to the rest*. If cross-disciplinary attention can be taken as an indication of potential for explanatory purchase, I believe that historical sociology's attention to the multiple (trajectories to) modernities is surely one path worth exploring (Arnason 2002; Einsenstadt 2000; Larraín 2000; Moore 1967; Mouzelis 1999; Therborn 1995; Wittrock 2000).⁴

For its part, the notion of world society has lent itself for analysing the global scope of modernity vis-à-vis its regional variations not only in sociology (Luhmann 1997; Stichweh 2000; Mascareño 2010) but also in international relations (Albert and Hilkermeier 2004; Buzan 2004). In relation to the critique of methodological nationalism, however, both traditions still have to prove that they are able to explicate the rise and main features of the nation-state without either reifying or obliterating it. The multiple modernities strategy seems to require too substantive an idea of different cultures or nations in order to understand what makes multiple modernities different expressions of a single modernity: a more open view as to the connections between their different

histories is still needed (Gutierrez-Rodriguez et al. 2010). And the theory of world society that has so far been successful in providing stronger conceptual foundations to always ill-defined globalization processes has, however, paid little attention to the actual success of the nation-state as one of modernity's crucial socio-political arrangements (Chernilo 2007a: 144–51).

Can nations be regarded as the natural and necessary form of human community throughout history? Is the nation-state a natural and necessary form of socio-political arrangement, but *only* in modernity? We have already said that in pre-empting the salience of nations over the past two centuries both claims do not seem so far apart. The presuppositional character of this ontological discussion finds expression in the normative question of whether the nation-state was, is and will continue to be the ultimate source of modern political legitimacy. My argument here is that the modern idea of the nation has never been the unchallenged locus of political legitimacy in modernity. Rather the opposite, the nation actually arose alongside two other, equally important, forms. One of these is modern classes (Mann 1993; Hobsbawm 1994; Fine and Chernilo 2003), the other is the universalistic conception of humanity that underpins cosmopolitanism (Delanty 2006; Durkheim 1992; Fine 2007; Habermas 2001). Nation, class and cosmopolitanism did not first emerge as a challenge to each other but as a way of complementing one another. Furthermore, the *idea* of the modern nation-state could fully unfold *thanks to* the support it borrowed from both socioeconomic transformations in terms of class and the universalistic normative appeal of cosmopolitanism. Nation, class and cosmopolitanism all required one another and the nation has never been able to monopolize modern political loyalties. They all three coevolved in modernity and the moments in which they began looking incompatible are to be carefully explicated and accounted for rather than taken as self-evident.

To take one example from the time of the First World War, even chauvinistic writers such as Friedrich Meinecke were able to recognize that modern cosmopolitanism and the modern nation-state were co-constitutive. Meinecke's thesis was that this allegiance was bound to dissolve at some point in the future, but he had no problem in arguing that it had been a necessary connection: 'The concept of the nation and of its autonomy was entwined and entangled with ideas that threatened to suffocate it. Universal, cosmopolitan thought was so integral a part of this generation that reappeared even where a Romantic predilection for the national seemed to have overcome the cosmopolitan Enlightenment' (Meinecke 1970: 69). He tried to grasp a trend that moved from an undifferentiated conception of humanity based on Christian natural law to a process of cultural differentiation along national lines and eventually to the unification of nations and states – as in the case of the German Reich in 1870 (Meinecke 1970: 48).

But even the belated constitution of the *German* national state owed a great deal to the original claim to universalism between the nation and humanity that underpinned the French Revolution: 'the true, the best German national feeling includes the cosmopolitan ideal of a humanity beyond nationality ... it is "un-German to be merely German"' (Meinecke 1970: 21). Meinecke's politics were undoubtedly nationalistic, and he seems to be falling for arguments 2 to 5 of methodological nationalism, but his assessment of the nation-state's alleged success in shaping up modern social life is not based on explicating modernity out of the trajectory of any nation-state – however powerful that

nation-state may be. Cosmopolitanism's universalistic framework remains, on the contrary, a critical part of the explanation. Against the strong charge of methodological nationalism, therefore, Meinecke rejects the idea that the nation's stage of development is the source through which other aspects of modern social life are ultimately to be accounted for.⁵

Modern conceptions of the nation and the nation-state system require this kind of cosmopolitan layout. Indeed, a more analytical version of this argument is found in Norbert Elias as he brings classes into this relationship between the nation and cosmopolitanism:

The 'we-feeling' of the pre-revolutionary upper classes of Europe, which surpassed the frontiers of states, was probably stronger than any 'we-feeling' – any feeling of identity – which men of these upper classes had with the lower classes of their own country. Their attachment to their own state did not yet have the character of an attachment to the nation. With few exceptions national sentiments were alien to noblemen of Europe prior to the French Revolution and in some countries for a long time after it . . . It was only in class-societies, not in inter-state societies, that the identity feelings of the ruling elites, and in the course of time those of wider strata, too, acquired the specific stamp of national feelings. (Elias 1996: 143–4)

Elias seeks to explicate the transition from a *cosmopolitan* to a *national* outlook in terms of the rise of modern *classes*. At stake is what he refers to as the 'duality' of normative codes of the nation-state: 'a moral code descended from that of rising sections of the *tiers état*, egalitarian in character, and whose highest value is "man" – the human individual as such; and a nationalist code descended from the Machiavellian code of princes and ruling aristocracies, inegalitarian in character, and whose highest value is a collectivity – a state, the country, the nation to which an individual belongs' (Elias 1996: 154–5).

Normatively, therefore, the nation was valued in so far as it seemed to be the place for the effective realization of modernity's *inclusionary tendencies and democratic hopes*. The nation was well regarded because it appeared to be an adequate vehicle for this kind of universalistic project in terms of one's own ethnic group, one's own comrades and human beings without further qualification. Political and social democracy were not preferred because they were primarily national; rather the opposite, the importance of the nation depends upon its universalistic commitment. To be sure, these expectations have been only imperfectly if at all reconciled with the nation's uglier side (Mann 2005; Wimmer 2002). But it should nonetheless be apparent that the abandonment of universalistic normative principles in favour of ethnically or religiously oriented politics of identity only increases the risks of authoritarian or violent regressions.

The extent to which the League of Nations and then the United Nations have lived up to the promises and standards upon which they were first instituted is surely questionable (Suganami 1989). On the one hand, it can be argued that states were rapid in learning how to best defend themselves militarily because good legal arguments do not win wars in the battlefields. And people learned equally quickly that a highly 'creative' reinterpretation of the historical record along national lines was rather useful to bolster internal unity, claim and reclaim territories and use other groups as scapegoats. Here,

the nation-state's own self-presentation as homogeneous and fully sovereign tends to lead to methodological nationalism at the level of more scholarly accounts. On the other hand, I should like to hold that the 20th-century interstate architecture, deficient as it is, remains unconceivable without a universalistic interpretation of the right to self-determination that, as a matter of principle, grants to all peoples the possibility of becoming fully fledged nation-states. There is a *cosmopolitan layout underneath the nation-state system*, without the help of which no individual nation-state can claim its right to self-determination in any meaningful way (Bull 1977). Indeed, this is precisely the kind of call that underpins recent attempts at the reconceptualization of democratic theory along global lines (Benhabib 2002; Bohmann 2007; Brunkhorst 2005; Habermas 2001).

The key to transcending methodological nationalism lies here in explicating the nation-state as a modern form of socio-political arrangement instead of seeing modernity as the final result of a number of different and endogenous national developments. The universalistic conception of modernity that is necessary to overcome methodological nationalism will need to draw theoretical support from notions such as multiple trajectories to modernity and world society. But when it comes to delineating the rise and main features of the nation-state itself, the combined analysis of class, nation and cosmopolitanism may still prove crucial. Let me now turn to the historical version of methodological nationalism.

History: The question of prevalence

The central tenet of this version of methodological nationalism refers to its alleged *prevalence* throughout the history of the social sciences (argument 6) – and this is something on which most of the writers we reviewed in the first part of the article happen to agree. But if we look at things more closely, it is curious to note that there are two rather different cases being raised against so-called 'grand' social theory. Whereas Wimmer and Schiller criticize classical social theory for its *ignorance* of the nation-state (argument 7), for Smith, Giddens and Billig the problem lies in classical social theory's *reification* or *naturalization* of the nation-state (argument 8). In other words, grand social theory is found equally at fault for having made *too much* and *too little* out of the nation-state. To that extent, arguments 9 (on Eurocentrism) and 10 (on the rise and fall of the nation-state) may be said to remain an implicit background for all forms of methodological nationalism.

But over the past few years a different outlook has begun to emerge; namely, that if some of the 'canonical' texts of social theory are read together, they begin to offer a conceptualization of the nation-state that is able to contribute to *transcending* methodological nationalism (Inglis 2009; Inglis and Robertson 2008; Turner 2006; Outhwaite 2006; Fine 2007a; Chernilo 2007a, 2007b). Despite their shortcomings, the claim is that the core social theory refers to the *critique* of particularistic worldviews such as Eurocentrism and narrow analytical frameworks such as methodological nationalism. Differently put, at least part of the blame lies with current commentators for having backwardly imposed a sense on the necessity of the nation-state that does not actually transpire in these past writers' works: a revision of the foundational period of the social sciences

remains a precondition to overcoming methodological nationalism. To be clear, I am not arguing here that all we need to do is to go back to reading good old books. Neither is my argument that any individual got it completely right in relation to understanding the nation-state.⁶ But we ought to put into brackets *what we think we know* about their understanding of the nation-state and give new perspectives and propositions the opportunity to emerge. Their difficulties, as much as their tentative solutions, are instructive to account for the opacity of the nation-state in modernity.

The kind of approach I believe we require is, again, aptly captured by Norbert Elias (1996: 123): ‘The increasing tendency to conceptualize processes as if they were unchanging objects represents a more widespread pattern of conceptual development running conversely to that of society at large, the development and dynamics of which have noticeably quickened from the eighteenth to the twentieth century’. For what concerns us here, this means that, although references to the nation have been part of the philosophical and indeed theological lexicon of Western thinking for several centuries, its changing meanings have been transformed over time. Some commonality may of course be found among them; possibly around the notion of a group that shares one or more features so that their actual depiction as a group becomes plausible. But this is a recognition that says nothing about any alleged transhistorical immutability, cultural homogeneity, evolutionary necessity and indeed state formation. We must not gloss over the differences between unreflective images of the nation in the past and the kind of solid and stable self-presentation of nation-states during the 20th century.

For instance, already in the early 18th century Giambattista Vico’s *The New Science* was established ‘on the principle of civil theology’ that was ‘able to describe the “ideal eternal history” traversed in time by the history of every nation’ (Löwith 1964: 124). In Vico’s work, however, the nation points neither ‘to the modern national state as such’ nor ‘to political institutions’ that would bring them closer to contemporary debates on methodological nationalism (Fisch 1970: xxiii). Rather, and very much within the context of early modern natural law theory, Vico was interested in a world ‘constituted by all the gentile nations taken together . . . “the great city of the nations, founded and governed by God”’ (Fisch 1970: xxv). The nation is for Vico a way to refer to those human populations whose historical differences were a result of God’s plans: ‘the principle of the common nature of nations which disclose the principles of the new system of the natural law of the gentes’ (Fisch 1970: xxxi). This view of the nation is already very different from Voltaire’s in his long essay on ‘Universal History: Essay on the Manner and Spirits of Nations’ which, by registering different civilizations as part of humanity’s universal progress, only a generation later had already transformed the study of nations into an increasingly secular and empirical field of enquiry (Löwith 1964: 105). And this is again different from Kant’s (1999) use of the term. In his cosmopolitan writings at the time of the French Revolution, Kant was interested in the idea of a federation of nations as an association of political communities which, organized as republics, would voluntarily enter into cooperative relations with one another with a view to establishing a future condition of perpetual peace. Needless to say, these early conceptions can hardly be uncritically related to romantic and post-Second World War notions that emphasized the nation’s central political role, cultural specificity and undying historical mission (Kohn 1961). Equivocal as they arguably are, therefore, the

references to the nation and the nation-state during the foundational period of modernity do not point in the direction of methodological nationalism. Revisiting the history of the social sciences may produce unexpected results, so let me just finalize this section with two short additional examples that point in this same direction.

The *critique* of imperialism and colonialism, we now know, was a key motif in such key Enlightenment thinkers as Rousseau, Kant and Herder (Muthu 2003). This theme complements standard reconstructions of these writers to demonstrate that standing up *against* empires was as constitutive a trend of the Enlightenment as any other of its most salient features. Muthu's (2003: 9) argument is that the more particularity and diversity was emphasized, the more inclusive these theories became: 'as the particularity and partial incommensurability of human lives came to the fore in a number of late 18th-century political writings, the moral universalism that occupied a formal, but ultimately hollow, position in earlier political theories became more genuinely universal'. A nationalistic reduction was then effected *after* the Enlightenment, and this may go a long way to explain the transparency of methodological nationalism that is associated with 20th-century social sciences: 'anti-imperialist sentiments largely fell by the wayside as the eighteenth century came to a close . . . By the mid nineteenth-century anti-imperialist thinking was virtually absent from Western European intellectual debates' (Muthu 2003: 5). The thoroughgoing postcolonial critique of classical social theory on the basis of its Eurocentrism – indeed, colonialism and racism (Connell 2007) – has a point when it asks for our empirical sources to be widened, methodological devices revisited, conceptual approaches refined, normative considerations be made more reflexive. Beyond this, however, I remain sceptical of this unilateral version of the postcolonial argument – indeed, I find its critique reductionist on several grounds: it is *empirically wrong*, as texts offer wider, richer materials than what is being granted, it is *conceptually misplaced* because it treats cultures as undifferentiated wholes and thus replaces methodological nationalism with methodological colonialism, and it is *normatively conservative* as it favours a politics of identity which in actual fact precludes the possibility of intercultural learning processes.

My second example comes from Robert Fine's reassessment of the relationship between Kant and Hegel that breaks with the caricature in which the former is the naïve representative of cosmopolitanism whereas the latter is the champion of nationalistic chauvinism. This view would have misunderstood the way in which 'Hegel questions Kant's association of nationalism with immaturity and blind passion by exploring the *rational* foundations of patriotism' (Fine 2003b: 616). Instead of rejecting Kant's cosmopolitanism *tout court*, Hegel was in fact concerned with cosmopolitanism being turned into an abstract and ideal notion devoid of any effective socio-historical and legal content; Hegel 'makes cosmopolitanism real and opens the space for action on the basis of a more complex understanding of social reality' (Fine 2003b: 610). The same Hegel who seemingly reified the state and attributed god-like qualities to it is now seen as a philosopher concerned with universal rights *as well as* national self-determination.

In departing from more conventional readings of the history of the social sciences, Muthu's and Fine's interpretations are surely trying to recover their heroes from what they consider unfair treatment. But although I cannot follow the substantive implications of their reflections here I am interested in their methodological insight: the need for shedding new light on past works and explanations we allegedly know all too well. In

other words, the naturalness of the nation-state that is *now* attributed to *past* social theory may have to be addressed back to current commentators' *own* lack of historical insight on the foundational period of social theory. There is a chain of thought in operation whose perverse logic reinforces the image of the prevalence of methodological nationalism in social theory.

In simplifying the representation of the past, we effectively narrow down the analytical scope of our current enquiries. Only one trend or event is seen as constitutive of the past period in which we are interested, which then becomes the only relevant aspect of concern, and we feel justified in overlooking conflicting trends. As we lack a clear theoretical backbone to hold our explanations on the nation-state together, we can no longer put forward a real explanation of what it is that we were interested in understanding, which in turn favours its eventual reification. We have moved full circle when the whole historical trend we sought to explicate in the first place, the rise and main features of the modern nation-state, is now hypostatized by that single event that has become the centre of our theoretical worldview – the social sciences' own methodological nationalism. Because social theory and the nation-state allegedly mirrored each other historically, the former is chronically prone to reification and the latter becomes *the* one modern social trend that is in need of explaining. The nation-state is now the centre of modernity and modernity is reconstructed as the sum of whatever number of national trajectories that can be accounted for with the help of social theory. The time has come to start breaking this vicious circle apart.

Conclusions

The contemporary relevance of discussing methodological nationalism lies in the fact that it is found in social theory as much as in empirical research, in states' self-presentation and in everyday media and political discourses. The paradoxical constitution of the current debate may be a reflection of certain substantive properties of the nation-state itself – of the opacity of its position in modernity.

The turn-of-the-century writings on globalization that gave new impetus to the debate on methodological nationalism need to be criticized for having conflated the necessary *conceptual* critique of methodological nationalism with the *empirical* claim of the nation-state's diminishing relevance. The argument I advanced in this article is, on the contrary, that we pay more rather than less attention to the nation-state itself. We need a deeper appreciation of the nation-state's key features so that we can theorize it rather than naturalize or reify it. In order to transcend methodological nationalism effectively, we must deepen the critical scrutiny devoted to whatever feature of the nation-state that may help us explicate how and why it has been so successful in becoming a key organizing centre of modern social life. But a critical aspect of this same success that still requires further explication is how the nation-state has been able to cope, rather successfully as well, with the fact that it has never been as triumphant and homogeneous as it has portrayed itself to be. We need strategies that allow us to make sense of the nation-state's past and main features but which also avoid attributing them full coherence. And we have equally seen that the solutions we may be able to offer are bound to prove unstable and create difficulties of their own.

In relation to reassessing the thesis of the historical prevalence of methodological nationalism in social theory, there are three final points to be highlighted. First, the task of immersing oneself in the history of social theory is no second-class intellectual endeavour. It does not replace empirical research nor can it be understood as the uncritical celebration of a disciplinary commonsense. It is, however, a job that requires time, care and the critical and open mind that is intrinsic to all scholarly projects. What I am calling for here is for the history of ideas to keep playing a critical role within social theory itself. Secondly, we must remain sceptical when distinctions between ‘them’ and ‘us’ get too neat. We are better off when we integrate our own contributions as a part of, rather than standing in opposition to, the intellectual traditions to which we belong. This may not bode well in terms of catching public attention but it does help reinforce epistemological cogency, explanatory purchase and normative awareness. Third, a subtler understanding of past writings on the nation-state may still be one of our best antidotes against the reintroduction of methodological nationalism by the back door: current uses of the nation seem to have little to do with 18th-century references to it. And past social theory is a valuable asset when it comes to addressing this difficulty. We are still in need of a more sensible understanding of the development of the nation-state vis-à-vis the evolution of the different conceptions of it in modernity. We have to find a way to delineate the enduring features of the nation-state that effectively make it a single socio-political arrangement in modernity. But this is a strategy that must *simultaneously* be able to express the changing faces of the nation-state itself.

The distinction between two versions and critiques of methodological nationalism hereby offered may help us correct some imbalances and difficulties. The more we refine our knowledge of the foundational period of the social sciences, the less plausible nationalistic explications of modernity become; the more social theory’s universalistic outlook comes to the fore, the better we will be able to transcend its Eurocentric bias. This way of transcending methodological nationalism requires more rather than less from social theory. It is the attitude of permanently going back and reassessing social theory’s own previous presuppositions to see whether methodological nationalism is being surreptitiously reintroduced. It is a commitment to trying to grasp the substantive features of the nation-state as a modern form of socio-political arrangement and being also prepared to resist the temptation of making it the key explanatory variable of modernity. It means remaining suspicious of rapid assurances on the nation-state’s successes *and* failures, its fantastic potentialities *and* horrible demons, so that we do not fall prey to the nation-state’s own uncritical celebration nor, indeed, of its critics’ equally uncritical damnation.

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Notes

1. An obvious addition to this list is of course the discipline of international relations (Shaw 2000; Scholte 2000), but I have elsewhere dwelt on the connections between the so-called domestic analogy debate in IR and methodological nationalism broadly understood (Chernilo 2010). In

addition to the disciplines I discuss here, the debate on methodological nationalism has proved illuminating in geography (Agnew 2007; Antonsich 2008), comparative education (Robertson and Dale 2008), memory studies (Levy and Szanider 2002), media studies (Mihelj 2008) and development studies (Gore 1996).

2. There is no hyperbole here. As I have criticized Ulrich Beck for introducing, in spite of his best intentions, methodological nationalism back into his own conceptualization of the nation-state (Chernilo 2006), he responded to this charge by arguing that I failed to realize that he *always* intended to use the notion of methodological nationalism ‘metaphorically’ (Beck 2008: 240).
3. An even bolder version of this argument, possibly the closest we can get to a *defence* of methodological nationalism without, however, using the term, or indeed accepting that it is a form of reification, is found in Liah Greenfeld (2006: 159, 161). In her view, nationalism is not only ‘the constitutive element of modernity’ but of ‘the modern culture. It is the symbolic blueprint of modern reality, the way we see, and thereby construct, the world around us, the specifically modern consciousness’. The problem with nationalism studies may simply be that their interest in the trees does not allow them to see the forest: the problem of conceptualizing *the* nation-state as a modern form of socio-political arrangement has proved so taxing that they lose sight of the insight that the nation-state is a result rather than a cause of modernity.
4. Barrington Moore’s (1967) classic *Social Origins of Dictatorships and Democracy* is key here. To the extent that his three routes to modernity (bourgeois, fascist and communist) are exemplified through different *national* cases, his work *can* be read as deploying a strong kind of explanatory methodological nationalism. But insofar as his book is actually concerned with those structural developments that led to the rise of these three modern routes, class relations and international contexts are the real causes and national cases the outcome in explaining the rise of modernity.
5. It is interesting to note that, roughly at the same time, Ernst Troeltsch (1958) could advance a similar account of the relationship between the nation-state and the idea of humanity, but without seeking to advance a strongly nationalistic agenda.
6. On this, see Justin Rosenberg’s (2005) vindication of Leon Trotsky vis-à-vis IR’s systematic failures in theorizing the international.

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Biographical note

Daniel Chernilo is Senior Lecturer in Sociology in the Department of Social Sciences at Loughborough University. A member of the international advisory boards of the *British Journal of Sociology* and the *European Journal of Social Theory*, he is author of *A Social Theory of the Nation-state* (2007) and, in Spanish, of *Nationalism and Cosmopolitanism* (2010) and *Social Theory's Claim to Universalism* (2011). His forthcoming monograph on *The Natural Law Foundations of Modern Social Theory* will be published by Cambridge University Press.